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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000172

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SUBJECT: BRV WARNS GLOBOVISION OF POSSIBLE SANCTIONS,  
CLOSURE

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES  
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

1. (C) Summary. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's (BRV's) harassment of Globovision, Venezuela's only independent all-news television network, is intensifying. The BRV appears to be laying the groundwork for the network's possible closure in the near future. Citing "public pressure," the BRV announced plans to investigate the network for allegedly violating the Media Law and defaming President Chavez. Moreover, since his December 2 electoral defeat, President Chavez has repeatedly accused Globovision of carrying out a "media war" against his government. Despite these threats, Globovision has maintained its critical editorial line and its owner has vowed not to back down from a confrontation with the BRV. The government could silence the network by using judicial and tax sanctions to force it off the airwaves. While Chavez has made similar attacks on Globovision in the past, it appears he is now willing to incur the political cost of sanctioning the network. Any action taken against Globovision will likely be portrayed by the BRV as a "grassroots" initiative in an attempt to reduce the negative international media attention that might follow. End Summary.

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Globo Under Pressure  
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2. (SBU) In recent weeks, government officials and Bolivarian civil society groups have intensified their attacks against Globovision, calling for the network to be investigated, sanctioned, and possibly closed. The National Telecommunications Regulatory Agency (CONATEL) in a vaguely worded January 30 letter claimed the station "may have violated" the Media Law of Social Responsibility during unspecified broadcasts of the nightly opinion television show "Hello Citizen" and other news spots. The letter did not specify if CONATEL planned to take any administrative actions against the network, but it implied the government was once again keeping close tabs on Globovision.

3. (SBU) Following CONATEL's lead, the National Assembly's Commission on Science, Technology, and Media announced February 11 plans to investigate the station for "its constant campaign of destabilization" against the government. That same day pro-government civil society groups presented a document to the Attorney General's Office urging it to

investigate Globovision for "defaming" Chavez. Additionally, the local media reports that more than 30 Bolivarian civil society groups are organizing signature drives requesting the CNE hold a referendum on revoking the network's broadcasting license. These same groups plan to hold demonstrations against Globovision in late February.

¶4. (C) Officials from the tax collection agency, SENIAT, visited Globovision February 8 and requested tax records and other administrative files. Separately, the ardently pro-government television show "The Razor Blade" frequently blasts Globovision and recently displayed a list of the network's sponsors, and some advertisers have apparently pulled their advertisements in response to this intimidation.

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Why Now?  
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¶5. (SBU) Since his December 2 electoral defeat, Chavez has stepped up his criticism of independent media outlets, particularly Globovision. The Venezuelan President accuses Globovision of carrying out a "media war" against his proposed changes to the constitution and his government in general. Specifically, the BRV sees Globovision as a threat because it undermines the government's efforts to impose its media hegemony and provides the opposition with a way to present its counter proposals to the electorate. Despite the Venezuelan president's intimidation of Globovision, the network has maintained its critical editorial line. This has emboldened Globovision's unique position as the only remaining independent all-news television network, but it has also made it a target for continued government harassment. While Globovision only commands 5 percent of the market, compared to Radio Caracas Television's (RCTV's) 40 percent before it was forced to move from public access to cable, its right to air has become a rally point for the opposition.

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RCTV All Over Again?  
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¶6. (C) The BRV's increasing hostility towards Globovision indicates the government is preparing punitive action against the network. It appears the BRV will attempt to either sanction Globovision, causing it to temporarily cease operating, or revoke its broadcasting license and force it off the air. Through judicial mechanisms the BRV could rule that Globovision has violated some aspect of the Media Law, thus requiring the network to pay a hefty fine, shut down temporarily, and/or demand it make changes to its programming before returning to the air. The BRV could also sanction Globovision via an administrative measure. In this scenario SENIAT could fine the station for incomplete accounting records or tax evasion.

¶7. (C) The BRV could also pursue a permanent shutdown of Globovision. However, given the negative international attention that followed the government-imposed closure of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) in May 2007, the situation would likely be managed differently. The BRV would probably attempt to portray the shutdown as a "grassroots" initiative, not a presidential top-down policy. Interestingly, "Bolivarian" groups have already petitioned different government ministries to investigate Globovision. This tactic would allow the BRV to take action while arguing it is merely acquiescing to public pressure.

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Comment  
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¶8. (C) While the BRV has yet to outline its final position on Globovision, the actions it is taking against the network are

similar to those it pursued before RCTV's closure. The Embassy's media contacts appear to be in denial (just as they were before RCTV's closure) that Chavez may be preparing to move against Globovision. Since BRV officials are also blaming Globovision for the December 2006 defeat of Chavez's proposed constitutional reforms, they may be anxious to silence Globovision before state and local elections in November. While Chavez has strongly criticized Globovision in the past, he now appears willing to pay the political cost of shutting this critical network this year. The BRV's temporary or permanent closure of Globovision would strike a lethal blow to freedom of expression in Venezuela and increase Chavez's control over the media.

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